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## Call for action on child exorcism

**Black church and community leaders are calling for action to protect children from the effects of exorcisms.**

A spokeswoman for Africans Against Child Abuse (Afruca) said church leaders who believe in possession needed education on child protection.

A BBC investigation suggests only a third of London's local authorities are addressing the issue seriously.

The Newsnight probe suggests some children are being beaten by parents trying to drive out evil spirits.

Afruca spokeswoman Debbie Ariyo said she was not surprised by the findings because the driving out of demons was known to be a widespread practice within the African churches.

"It's part and parcel of what churches do in terms of freeing people from what they see as the stranglehold of the devil.

"But it does worry me that local authorities are not making the effort to link up with the churches in terms of their practices regarding child protection," Ms Ariyo said.

### 'Institutional failure'

However, Joseph Ocheno, a community activist in Peckham, south London, said he believed some stories of exorcisms were an exaggeration.

"I know, as someone who's actively involved in the community, that there are all sorts of stories that come out of churches and I do not think personally that these things are as widespread as they're made out to be.

"I hope this doesn't divert from the very fundamental issue of the massive institutional failure that led to the unfortunate death of Victoria Climbié," Mr Ocheno said.

The Newsnight investigation comes on the fifth anniversary of the death of eight-year-old Victoria Climbié, killed by carers who claimed she was possessed by the devil.



A 10-year-old girl goes through "deliverance" in a London church

**“ Exorcism is a good thing but it's not meant to be abusive ”**

Katie Kirby  
African Caribbean Evangelical Alliance

Newsnight's study found a third of all London boroughs did no

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work at all on the issue of the effects of child exorcisms.

They included Lambeth in south-east London, a borough with one of the biggest African population in the UK.

However, Hanna Miller of the Association of Directors of Social Services said it was unfair to say the issue had been ignored.

"It does take a while for people to get geared up, to become expert, to find out about things," she said.

"The fact is you have boroughs that are actively engaging, they have recognised those issues and done something about it."

The challenge for London now was that good practice should be rolled out to boroughs not doing as much as they should, Ms Miller added.

### 'Culture'

In Tower Hamlets in east London, where the authorities are taking the issue seriously, 30 churches which might inform parents their children were possessed have been identified.

The Metropolitan Police is currently investigating a number of cases of so-called "faith crimes".

Detective Superintendent Chris Bourlet of the Met's Child Protection Central Command told Newsnight reporter Angus Stickler the scale of the problem was difficult to determine.

**“ Abuse is abuse, and can never be overlooked or mitigated against by cultural or religious factors ”**

David Pearson  
Churches' Child Protection  
Advisory Service

"We are talking about child abuse, physical abuse, mental abuse, actually using emotional abuse against the child - quite serious offences in some cases - up to physical woundings of children," Mr Bourlet said.

Sociologist Dr Richard Hoskins, of Kings College London, recently returned from doing research on the issue in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where he found thousands of children were believed to be possessed.

He told Newsnight the problem for the UK was potentially "massive".

"We are on the cusp of something quite sinister and major here, " he said, before calling for a government task force to look into the issue, rather than just leaving it to the criminal justice process.

However, Katie Kirby of the African Caribbean Evangelical Alliance (ACEA) said it was important to keep the issues in context.

"Exorcism is a good thing but it's not meant to be abusive, there's no biblical precedent for that," she said.

"It's important social services work with the faith

communities to understand them and make sure they're not misinterpreting the culture but challenging anything that's immoral or unsafe for children."

David Pearson of the Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service, an independent authority, said it was vital cultural considerations did not take precedent over a child's welfare.




Victoria Climbié was killed by carers who claimed she was possessed

Mr Pearson, who gave evidence at the inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié, said: "Abuse is abuse, and can never be overlooked or mitigated against by cultural or religious factors."

Lord Laming, who conducted the inquiry into the Climbié case, said he was "appalled by the terrifying experiences" to which some children in the report had been subjected.

"Children are not chattels, they are citizens, and they are entitled to the protection of the law," he told Newsnight.

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